

VZCZCXRO3048
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ZNR UUUUU ZZH
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FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
INFO RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHRC/USDA FAS WASHDC
RUEHPH/CDC ATLANTA GA
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 3059

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000261

SIPDIS

HHS PASS TO OGHA (KULIKOWSKI/CUMMINGS)
STATE FOR STAS AND AIAG (REED-ROWE)
HHS FOR NIH/FIC (GLASS/MAMPILLY/HANDLEY)
HHS FOR FDA (LUMPKIN/VALDEZ)
HHS FOR CDC (BLOUNT/COX)
USDA FOR APHIS (FLEMING/BURLESON)
USDA FOR FAS (RIKER/BEAN)
NEW DELHI FOR FAS/APHIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [AMGT](#) [AMED](#) [CASC](#) [TBIO](#) [ASEC](#) [KFLU](#) [PGOV](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: WEST BENGAL GOVERNMENT ENCOURAGES SOCIAL DISTANCING DURING
FESTIVE SEASON

11. Summary: Over the past three weeks there has been a decline in the rate of reported H1N1 infections in Kolkata. But thousands of people gathered in enclosed spaces during the ensuing Durga Puja festival could increase H1N1 transmission. The West Bengal government has launched a campaign to encourage people to practice social distancing during this annual festival. Given the scale and importance of Durga Puja, voluntary isolation of people with flu symptoms is the only viable option to keep H1N1 within manageable limits. West Bengal's public health officials are hoping that an awareness campaign encouraging social distancing and Mother Goddess Durga will protect them from a potential pandemic.

Current Status Of H1N1 Infection

12. According to Health Department sources as of September 16, 133 people in CG Kolkata's consular district have been infected with the H1N1 virus. Of these, 120 were from Kolkata city while seven were from the Northeastern states and six from other states in Eastern India. Till date, no one in the consular district has died of the infection and in the past few weeks, the rate of new infections has decreased. According to the Government of West Bengal (GOWB)'s Health Department, the number of confirmed cases has reduced over the past three weeks. There were four reported cases over the past week, seven cases the week before that, and 16 the week before. There have been no reported confirmed cases outside West Bengal since August 17.

Durga Puja Raises Concern

13. Despite the lower rates, GOWB Health Department officials are concerned that the Durga Puja festival may cause an increase in H1N1 transmission. GOWB's Nodal Officer for H1N1, Dr. Asit Biswas, told PolFSN that there is a heightened possibility of the virus being transmitted during the four-day long Durga Puja beginning September 25. This is because hundreds of thousands of people will gather in confined spaces to celebrate the festival. Although a Hindu religious festival, the Durga Puja over the past few decades has become a grand carnival attracting people from all over the world. Streams of people gather in enclosed temporary temples -- known as Pandals -- to see clay images of the Mother Goddess Durga who is believed to be protecting people from all evils. According to media reports, Kolkata will have 2,000 Pandals this year.

The Official Response

¶4. To reduce H1N1 transmission during the festival, the GOWB has launched a media campaign to educate people about H1N1. The Health Department is hoping that by raising awareness about how the infection spreads, the campaign will keep people with influenza-like symptoms away from the Pandals. The Health Department has set up electronic scroll boards at prominent locations in the city and has started beaming public health messages through popular TV stations. The Health Department has also requested assistance from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) and Kolkata Police to persuade Puja organizers to educate people about good hygiene and the need to avoid crowd if someone is taken ill. KMC's Chief Medical Officer told PolFSN that his office will distribute posters to Puja organizers all over the city. All the 19 district hospitals (referral hospitals under the government healthcare system) now have H1N1 isolation wards.

Comment

¶5. The GOWB seems to be alert to the possibility of an increased H1N1 transmission as a result of Durga Puja. With its limited medical facilities, West Bengal would not be able to adequately manage an explosion in the number of H1N1 infections if the virus is spread during Durga Puja. Given the scale and importance of Durga Puja in Bengali society, imposing restrictions on festival congregations is not an option. West Bengal's public health officials are therefore hoping that social distancing and Mother Goddess Durga will protect them from a potential pandemic.

PAYNE